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ABSTRACT

A description is given of an exemplary Teacher Center program that is based on established knowledge of the characteristics of adult learning processes and motivation. Four features distinguish this program: (1) The Center staff operates out of a small office and takes its services to the teachers in their own buildings: (2) Emphasis is placed on teachers making decisions concerning their own professional growth and benefiting from self initiated and directed programs: (3) Resources are focused on a few specific inservice objectives: and (4) All objectives are stated in terms of student outcomes. An incentive award program makes stipends available for initiating staff development projects and curriculum units, preparing inservice programs for colleagues, and studying specific topics. Free workshops and courses offered by a cooperating university are available. Limited funding of resource centers for each area school is awarded by the policy board. These funds are typically used for the purchase of source books and other professional resource materials. (JD)

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APPLICATION OF ADULT LEARNING PRINCIPLES IN A TEACHER CENTER THAT'S MAKING A DIFFERENCE

by

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Overview

Hailed by Schmieder and Yarger as the "hottest educational concept on the scene today," teacher centers are fast gaining visibility and importance in inservice education. They have appeared in many different sizes, forms, names and contexts every since the concept arrived from England on the winds of educational change that swept the sixties. These centers have provided teachers with opportunities to exchange ideas, talk about common problems, take courses and workshops, and visit with colleagues. Thornbury (1977) observed that US centers may now provide teachers with the opportunity to take charge of their own professional destiny and Burrell (1976) points out that centers have the potential for creating broader views of the philosophy and practice of teaching.

Although the beginnings of the teacher center concept in other countries can be specifically pin-pointed in time and place, the origin of American teacher centers is more nebulous. Leonard (1974) traces the origins of American centers to: (1) post World War II laboratory schools, (2) state and federal legislation of the 60's and 70's, (3) public outrage against American education in the literature of the last two decades, and (4) national and state offices of education, study groups, commissions and mandates or educators in the field.

The move to establish teacher centers in the United States received a strong boost when the federal government funded 60 centers across the country in 1978 with an appropriation of $8.25 million. Awards were made to agencies in 37 states, the District of Columbia and Guam. In fiscal year 1979 an additional 29 centers were funded with an appropriation of

$12.6 million and 10 new centers were added in FY 80.

Given this increased activity involving teacher centers, will there be an improvement in the quality of inservice education? Issues relating to this question which will need to be addressed as an answer is sought include:

1. Will teacher centers be able to avoid the pitfalls of locally designed programs?
2. How can the principles of adult learning be applied to the design of a teacher center?
3. What are the characteristics of an effective teacher center?

The Pitfalls of Locally Designed Programs

In his article, "A Users Guide to the Evaluation of Inservice Education," Donald J. Baden states his belief that if there is to be change in teacher behavior, the most common form of stimulation will be onsite inservice activities. He has found, however, that often an increase in activities at the local level has not created an immediate improvement in the quality of staff development. There is a tendency for locally developed programs to be designed in the same ways they have been for many years. The pitfalls he identifies are:

1. Inservice programs are planned in a disjointed fashion with little or no continuity from one program to the next.
2. Inservice teacher education is planned by either administrators or by an administratively selected committee of teachers with little input from all potential participants.
3. Activities are planned without the setting of specific objectives and with topics which lend themselves to only shallow discussion of current topics in education.

4. Too little time is allotted for a thorough examination of any topic with little or no follow-up provided to support any of the new ideas generated by the programs.

5. Participants behave basically at the end of the program in the same manner they did at the beginning of the effort.

6. Inservice education, while tolerated or, in some cases, even enjoyed by teachers, is rarely seen by the participants as resulting in changing their classrooms. (p. 4)

What is needed, Baden states, is a systematic effort at creating behavior change in teachers which can only be brought about if inservice education is changed dramatically. Embryonic efforts at many teacher centers indicate that new approaches are emerging and having positive effects. Conditions which help bring about these positive effects may be found in the research on adult learning.

Principles of Adult Learning

Litwin (1979) summarizes the research on adult learning according to the following list of "principles."

1. When learners believe they can, will, or should change, learning is more likely to lead to measurable behavioral change.

2. Learning is more likely to improve performance when the learning experience is based upon skills and practices that are known to lead to high performance.

3. Learning is more likely to occur when there is unfreezing of prior attitudes, thoughts, and behavior patterns.

4. Learning will be enhanced if learners can observe and study examples of the desired behavior.

5. When learners identify, describe, and discuss the desired behavior in relation to job demands, corporate policies, and informal norms of the organization, learning is more likely to lead to measurable change back on the job.

6. The learning experience is more likely to influence behavior when learners perceive that the desired behavior is consistent with their ideal self-image.

7. The more frequently individuals practice the desired behavior the more likely it is that new behavior patterns will be demonstrated back on the job.

8. When learners get feedback on how well they are doing, learning is more likely to lead to behavioral change.

9. Learning will be more effective in changing behavior when learners set concrete goals and develop written action plans as part of the learning process.

10. The learning experience will be enhanced as all parts of the whole person are activated and integrated.

11. Learning is more likely to lead to behavioral change when the physical-social environment encourages and supports the emergence of new behavior patterns.

12. The creation of an on-the-job support system maximizes the application of new learning and behavioral change.

The next section describes the Amherst (Massachusetts) Area Teacher Center and the way these principles were used in its design.

The Amherst Area Teacher Center

The Amherst Area Teacher Center is in its third year of operation being one of the pilot federal programs funded in 1978. This exemplary center incorporates virtually all of the philosophical and programmatic attributes of effective staff development as they are depicted in the literature. The AATC can be used to illustrate the characteristics of of an effective program that is working and one that has avoided most of the pitfalls.

The Amherst Area Teacher Center is an organization whose primary mission is to help teachers in the Amherst area schools improve their effectiveness. The AATC operates with a staff of five persons: a director,

an inservice coordinator, a research associate, an associate aide, and a secretary. The governance of the Center is through a policy board which is comprised of area teachers, administrators, school committee members, and other interested parties. As required by Federal guidelines, a majority of policy board members are full-time classroom teachers.

Four features distinguish the AATC from the more generalized version of "teacher center:" first, this center is not a place where teachers come to build "make-and-take" projects, to participate in workshops, or to peruse resource materials. Instead, the Center staff operates out of a small office and takes its services to teachers in their own buildings and in other central locations. Second, the Amherst Area Teacher Center is guided by a well-publicized and well-articulated "belief system." This belief system focuses on the need for teachers to be actively involved in solving classroom related problems, making decisions concerning their own professional growth programs, and benefiting from self-initiated and self-directed programs. Third, the AATC has chosen to focus its resources on a few specific inservice objectives rather than dealing broadly with the myriad of possible paths which inservice can take. The fourth distinguishing feature is that all objectives are stated in terms of student outcomes--how each program will benefit the students of participating teachers and staff.

The AATC operates three primary staff development programs. The first of these is an incentive award program which makes stipends available to teachers and other school personnel for the purpose of initiating staff development projects. These grants are awarded by the policy board on the basis of competitive proposals. Stipends have been awarded for such diverse purposes as attending conferences, developing curriculum

units, preparing inservice programs for colleagues, and studying specific topics.

The second staff development program is the sponsorship of free workshops and courses. A catalog of workshop and course offerings is published twice a year, listing offerings ranging from single afternoon seminars to three-credit graduate level university courses. Workshops are open on a first-come, first-served basis with non-area teachers being allowed to fill any vacant places. University courses are generally co-sponsored with the University of Massachusetts, with the Teacher Center providing partial tuition for a certain number of participants.

The third staff development program, which is much smaller in scope that the other two, is the limited funding of resource centers for each area school. These funds are awarded by the policy board on the basis of proposal requests from each school. Funds are typically used for the purchase of source books and similar professional resource material.

The implementation of programs in accordance with the features described above creates a dynamic complex of operations. By providing a communication network within the client institutions and by stimulating interest and planning within clearly focused areas, the Teacher Center has caused resource identification and sharing which are beyond the scope of any one of its programs. Programs and features feed into each other, creating a whole which is larger than the sum of its parts. The focusing on a few specific objectives insures that problems will be attacked from several angles by district personnel with resulting interest, collegiality, and inter-building sharing. Many incentive award recipients disseminate their findings through the workshop and course program. The re-

view of incentive award proposals by the policy board leads to the identification of resources and of possibilities for sharing and co-operation. In addition, the fact that Teacher Center activities take place in the schools rather than at the Center and that teachers are encouraged to be actively involved in initiating projects help to create a feeling of "ownership" by teachers of Teacher Center activities. This intricate set of relationships is the result of the overall design and may therefore be considered to be planned synergy.

In addition to the synergistic interrelationship of Teacher Center activities, the operation of the Amherst Area Teacher Center reflects a commitment to planned change. The ultimate goal of the Teacher Center is to produce change and development in the institutions which it serves. Programs and plans to affect teacher attitudes and behaviors and to benefit students are considered in the light of the probable continuing institutional changes which they may bring about. The attention given to programs involving client participation in identifying and solving problems, as opposed to the promotion of packaged "lay-ons" is one example of the change orientation. The constant attention to generating client "ownership" of Teacher Center programs is another. The fact that this change orientation has been built in from the original planning and proposal writing indicates the strength and depth of this commitment. (Hawley, 1980)

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